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ABSTRACT

In the last decade there has been a whirlwind of change in policies affecting social studies education. Among the most noteworthy changes have been a national commission on social studies, subject-centered national standards, statewide high-stakes testing, school restructuring, and performance assessment. All of these changes have ramifications for method, the effective direction of subject matter to desired results. This paper suggests four ways in which social studies researchers could inform and challenge policymaking. The paper focuses on the growing centralization of curriculum decision making and associated high-stakes tests that has come to the forefront since the advent of national standards. Contains 15 references. (BT)

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Method in an age of national standards[1]

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In the last decade there has been a whirlwind of change in policies affecting social studies education. Mostly social studies educators have been cast in a reactive role to initiatives originating in broader changes in educational policy. My aim in this paper is to suggest how social studies researchers, specifically through utilization of past research and the conduct of new research, could inform and challenge policy-making. Although there is no guarantee our voice will change the overall policies, it may be that we can have a significant effect on the methods required to implement change (see Thornton, 1997).

Among the most noteworthy changes have been a national commission on social studies, subject-centered national standards, statewide high-stakes testing, school restructuring, and performance assessment. All of these changes have ramifications for method, the effective direction of subject matter to desired results (Dewey, 1916, p. 165). To illustrate my case, I will mainly focus on the growing centralization of curriculum decision-making and associated high-stakes tests that has come to the forefront since the advent of national standards.

Top-down change has become the educational panacea of the 1990s, promising variously "world-class standards" and "every child can learn." This strategy, of course, underestimates the extent to which changes in classroom practice cannot be merely

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mandated. Rather change occurs through a process of "mutual adaptation" between the innovation and teacher stakeholders (McLaughlin, 1997). In the debate about national standards, however, the "political correctness" of the relative weight assigned traditional or newer content emphases almost monopolized attention. For example, in their spirited response to conservative critics of the national standards in United States history, Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn (1997) fail to list "methods," "teaching," "instruction," or "learning" in the index of their 300-page book. By my count, they devote two and one-half pages to what the standards ought to look like behind the classroom door (pp. 268-270). The revised standards themselves do include lengthy lists of tasks "should be able to" do, but these tasks fall short of substantive guidance on method. As Hazel Hertzberg (1988) observed, reducing method to a series of teaching tips or gimmicks trivializes the relationship between content and method.

Of course, the framers of national standards in United States history were not primarily concerned with method in the sense of which I speak. Rather, as was common during the structures of the disciplines movement during the 1960s, the framers assumed the methods (and content interests) of historians were equally applicable to teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools. Their reasoning seems to be that the new social and cultural history of the last 25 years, with its broader methodological (and substantive) focus on the masses and disadvantaged rather than elites, is in itself sufficient guarantee of its relevance to school social studies. But we have ample evidence that students often fail to see such interests of historians as relevant to their interests or lives, in both method (Fenton, 1968) and substance (Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 125).

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There is a great deal of recent experience that could inform the debate about top-down change. For example, in New York State, there have been at least three iterations of the 9th and 10th grade social studies curriculum in the last ten years, a back and forth between a global studies area approach and a chronological world history. As John B. MacDonald (in process) notes, these continuing waves of reform have deep effects on the methods and materials teachers develop, refine, and use. What have we learned about how curriculum change affects method? When does reform "fatigue" set in? What policies and supports are needed when top-down changes are mandated? How can teachers retain well-tried and successful performance assessments when all students must be prepared for statewide tests?

Thus far, I have argued that top-down change has attracted criticism from social studies researchers (e.g., Ross, 1997), but we need a more sustained critique and the presentation of alternatives to policy-makers. If, as it now seems, we are stuck with statewide standards and associated high-stakes tests, what can we recommend as the best ways to deal with them?

To begin with social studies researchers could explore ways to capitalize on the possible positive side effects of top-down change. For example, the support of historical associations, national social studies reports, patriotic societies, and state laws have served to protect and legitimate courses in United States history throughout the twentieth century (see Thornton, in press). Similarly, whatever its intrinsic merits, statewide testing of social studies at the elementary level may help stem a couple of decades of growing neglect of social studies in favor of reading, language arts, and math. There may be related

opportunities in the growing use of document-based-questions (DBQs) presented in statewide tests in states such as New York.

Second, researchers should prepare a series of position papers that complement, add to, and extend existing social studies policy statements such as NCSS guidelines. Specifically, the expertise of researchers should be employed to recommend both what policies should be adopted and to inform policy initiatives already underway. As a symposium on educational policy and the teaching of history a few years ago demonstrated, policy-makers can and do proceed without input from researchers (Barton, Downey, Epstein, Levstik, Seixas, Thornton, & VanSledright, 1996). It seems we need to go to policy-makers if our voices are to be heard.

Third, as I have already said, social studies researchers have a special responsibility to speak out on instructional methods. For all the talk (mainly originating with scholars and policy-makers outside the social studies field) in the last decade of "teacher knowledge," "professionalized teaching," and teacher testing, little of it will contribute to educational improvement at the classroom level unless teachers use appropriate methods. As has recently been persuasively documented in mathematics education, the crucial variable in teacher competence is the teaching methods they use (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999, p. 10). There is good reason to believe the same is true in social studies as we have documented cases where the "same" subject matter, with the same textbooks, and comparable students plays out in markedly different ways because teachers use different methods (Thornton, 1988). Even seemingly constricting curricular orientations such as "cultural literacy" can have strikingly different effects in the classroom (Flinders, 1996). Thus, even in a time of curriculum standards and statewide testing, social studies

researchers can help explicate our professional options since policies of standardization cannot (and ought not) dictate all that happens at the classroom level.

Finally, I am aware that much policy-making proceeds without reference to theory or research (or at least research that fails to support what the policy-makers have already decided to do). But I am suggesting that social studies researchers have an obligation to try and inform policy. To do otherwise is, as Joseph Schwab (1997) put it, a "flight" from the practical problems of the field. We may not always be successful, but relegating ourselves to the sidelines is to abdicate any chance of influence.

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